Melanoma Institute Australia offers new hope to desperately ill melanoma patients with brain tumours

World-first clinical trials set to launch in Australia

Embargoed until Sunday 16 November, 2014: *Melanoma Institute Australia* today announced the launch of a world-first clinical trial that aims to benefit patients with advanced melanoma, specifically melanoma tumours that have spread to the brain (metastases).

Drugs that are currently showing promising results in advanced melanoma patients will be offered exclusively to patients with brain metastases – a group of patients who are typically excluded from clinical trials and have limited treatment options available. Most patients with brain metastases die within four months.

Half of all patients diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma will develop brain metastases at some point during their illness. Until now, treatment has been unavailable for these patients and as such the clinicians at *Melanoma Institute Australia* (MIA) are committed to developing new treatment options that could prove to be a significant step in finding a cure.

The new MIA-led clinical trial is investigating the use of an experimental immunotherapy treatment known as anti-PD-1. PD-1 is a cell surface protein which, when blocked by an anti PD-1 drug, encourages the T cells to recover their ability to react to the tumours and in many cases kill the bulk of the tumour cells in desperately ill patients. **This immunotherapy trial is the first in the world to investigate anti PD-1 drug, nivolumab, and nivolumab plus ipilimumab specifically in patients with active brain metastases.**

The trial is being hosted at MIA's Poche Centre in North Sydney, and there will also be a number of other research centres along the Eastern seaboard offering this world-first trial.
Principal Investigator Associate Professor Georgina Long from *Melanoma Institute Australia* and The University of Sydney, comments, "Being able to test the activity of an immunotherapy in the brain is an exciting avenue of research.

"This trial offered by the *Melanoma Institute Australia* offers potential hope to not only the patients who are on the trial, but if it proves successful, this has implications for patients around the world.

"The outcome of this trial may well change the treatment paradigm for how doctors treat melanoma patients with brain metastases," Long added.

Historically, patients with brain metastases are excluded from clinical trials unless they have been completely treated and stable for a long duration of time. However, because of the incredibly poor prognosis with brain metastases, this is difficult to attain and until recently have only been treated with local treatments, such as surgery or radiotherapy. Systemic chemotherapy historically has shown little effect in brain metastases and as such, patients with brain metastases have been excluded from these trials.

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Clinicians at *Melanoma Institute Australia* frequently attend to patients with brain metastases and are committed to finding therapies that will help prolong their lives. In 2012, Associate Professor Long spear-headed research into using BRAF-inhibitors in patients with brain metastases and proved that there was activity in the brain [Long, GV. *Lancet Onc* 2012; Falchook GS, Long GV, *et al. Lancet* 2012].

Funding from this trial was passionately raised by the community through Melanoma March 2014 and 900KMFORACURE – an event that saw 2 melanoma survivors walk from Sydney to Melbourne to raise melanoma awareness and $160,000 for this trial. Grant funding was also provided by BMS.

As strict inclusion criteria apply, patients interested in going on the trial should speak with their oncologist.

For more information or to arrange an interview contact:

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Backgrounder on melanoma:

- In 2009, the 1-year survival rate for patients with stage 4 melanoma was only 30 per cent.. With advances in medical research, today we are seeing survival rates of up to 80 per cent..
- Half of patients diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma will develop brain metastases at some point during their illness, and 20–25 per cent will already have brain metastases when first diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma.
- Australia has the highest incidence of melanoma in the world and is often referred to as “Australia’s national cancer”.
- Around 12,500 new cases are diagnosed each year and it is responsible for over 1,500 deaths.
- One person every six hours will die from melanoma in Australia.
- Melanoma is the most common cancer in young Australians, affecting more individuals aged 15 to 39 than any other cancer.
- While 90 per cent of people with melanoma are able to be cured by having the primary melanoma cancer removed, the cancer spreads in the other 10 per cent because it is caught too late.

Melanoma Institute Australia

- Melanoma Institute Australia (MIA) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to preventing and curing melanoma through innovative research, treatment and education programs.
- Headquartered at the Poche Centre in North Sydney, it is now the world’s largest melanoma research and treatment centre.
- MIA is affiliated with The University of Sydney, St Vincent’s and Mater Health Sydney, The Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and Australian & New Zealand Melanoma Trials Group (ANZMTG)
- Melanoma Institute Australia relies on the generosity of individuals, organisations and government funding to continue its ground-breaking work into this potentially devastating cancer.
- You can follow Melanoma Institute Australia on Facebook at www.facebook.com/pages/Melanoma-Institute-Australia or on Twitter at @MelanomaAus.

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